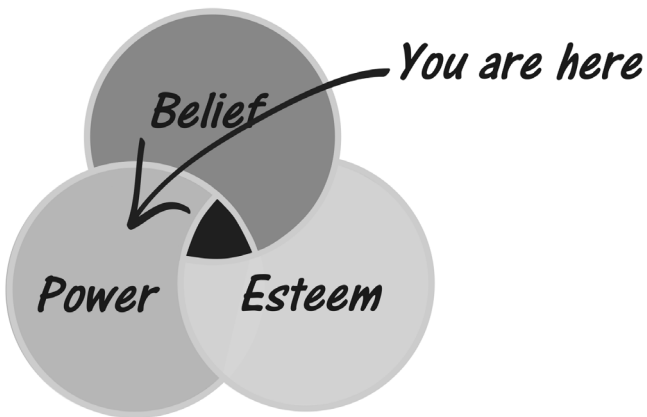


You've got the power



Hi Sue

I just finished an escalated call and whilst hearing the customer rant I was thinking about our coaching. I finished the call feeling calm and quite proud of myself, my colleague said 'Hey Emily, you handled that call really well'. My reply was, 'I chose to not let him affect me'. During the call the customer said I was a maggot and I should jump off the bridge and kill myself. At that moment I smiled to myself and apologised to the customer, saying I couldn't help him further and how sorry I was how he had become so upset. Not once did this make me upset me or make me angry, I just felt sorry for him instead. Normally I would be using sign language on my computer screen or pulling faces with my co-workers. Today I was in the 'Unshakeable Zone'. Hee hee.

Obviously it's going to take me a lot of time to be good at this and to think of the 'powers' I have, but I would definitely like to pass this onto my co-workers as I feel they can benefit from this, as that call above is similar to what we receive on a daily basis.

The main message I got from our coaching is you have the power to choose the way you feel and think, that until we accept responsibility for the role we play in creating or maintaining it, our stress levels will remain outside of our control.

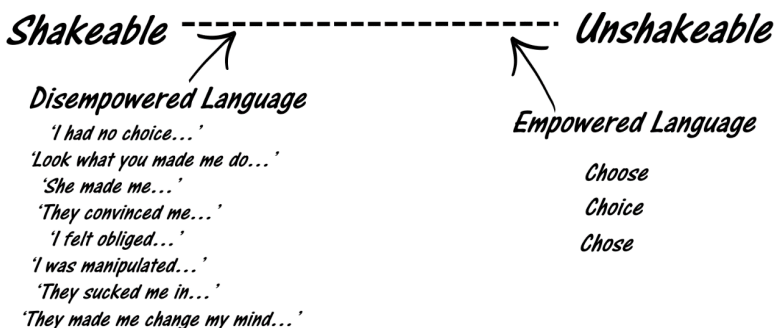
Looking forward to seeing you again.

Emily

I was so happy when I received this email from Emily. Before coaching, she used to believe other people could make her feel a certain way. This might be a useful belief when they 'make' her feel happy, loved, important, valued etc. However, it is not so useful if she believed they can 'make' her feel worthless, annoyed, angry etc.

THE POWER OF CHOICE

Believing a customer makes you feel a certain way is surrendering your power to choose. The 'X makes me feel Y...' language is disempowered language. It takes you into victimhood, and it is probably outside your conscious awareness. It's understandable that disempowered language sneaks into our language undetected. If you listen carefully, there is plenty of disempowered language used in our society. You will hear it in songs, on television, in conversations all around you. *'You make me so happy'*. *'Look what you made me do'*, *'Losing weight will make you feel happier and more confident.'*



The three magic words of empowerment

If you want to ensure customers can't push your buttons, it's helpful to know the three magic words:

Choose

Choice

Chose

Saying, *'The customer made me so angry'* is using disempowered language. It's giving your power away to the customer, then blaming them for your feelings.

However, if you say, *'I chose to feel angry at the customer because of the meaning I give to their words'*, you are owning your powers, and you are taking responsibility for your choices.

Your four personal powers

I first learnt about the four personal powers from American psychologist, Dr. L Michael Hall. He explains that your personal powers are your ability to respond to any situation.¹⁵ Your 'response-ability' is made up of the following four powers:

YOUR FOUR PERSONAL POWERS



The power to choose what you believe (beliefs)

The power to choose what you say (words)

The power to choose how you feel (emotions)

The power to choose what you do (actions)

You cannot not respond. You are always responding in some way. You have the power to respond by believing, speaking, feeling, and behaving. You own and have a choice in how you respond, which means you are also accountable and responsible for your beliefs, words, emotions, and actions.

We covered the power to choose what you believe in great detail in the previous chapter, so let's explore your other three powers in more detail:

The power to choose how you feel

You are able to experience a wide range of emotions including love, hate, lust, anger, joy, fear, happiness and so on. This power is influenced by what you believe. In simple terms, from your thinking comes your feeling. This is an empowering belief; however, recently some experts have had a different perspective on this. When you know your emotions are just feedback letting you know there is a difference between what you expected to happen and your reality, you can use them to your advantage. Accepting your emotions gives you greater choice in what you do with them.

With the exception of the *amygdala hijack* (fight or flight response for survival) and certain chemical imbalances resulting in conditions like anxiety and depression, you *can* choose how you feel.¹⁶ Please keep in mind we are talking about people who are mentally healthy when we are talking about the power to choose how you feel.

Some of my clients have trouble owning the useful belief, '*I can choose how I feel*'. That's because they genuinely believe their emotions can't be controlled, they often describe emotions as sneaking up on them. They experience feeling overwhelmed by emotions. I understand this - when someone first suggested to me, '*You know Sue, you can choose how you feel*', I responded with anger, and thought to myself, '*Why on earth, would I choose to feel miserable??!*'

And, *'Oh, so you are saying it's my fault I'm miserable...you are blaming me!'*

Two exceptions to choosing how you feel

If you are having trouble with the whole, 'You can choose how you feel' idea, it's important to note that there are a few situations when you actually can't choose how you feel. Here are two exceptions:

1. Physical / Biological / Chemical

For people who experience generalised anxiety or depression, or other mental health conditions, it is not as simple as 'just cheer up'. There are genuine physical, biological and chemical reasons why choosing how you feel is difficult, and sometimes impossible. People can seek professional treatment to have a greater degree of choice, but let's be clear: the four powers idea works best for mentally healthy, functioning people.

2. Fight or Flight Response

The term 'fight or flight response' was originally used in 1915 by Harvard Medical School physiologist Walter Cannon.¹⁷ It describes an innate survival mechanism that kept us safe back when we were cave people. We didn't have time to stop and think about what we should do when we saw a tiger coming towards us (those who did were eaten by the tiger).

When you are at work and you sense a threat to your safety, either physical or psychological, it is human and

normal to try to keep yourself safe. Your emotional brain takes over and you experience the fight or flight (some experts also add a freeze) response. In that moment, you cannot choose how you feel, because the rational, logical part of your brain has been hijacked. There is nothing you can do about it.

During a fight or flight response you may experience your heart beating fast, sweaty armpits, or a dry mouth. You may notice your thinking seems fuzzy. Your mind goes blank. This is because of the soup of chemicals and hormones being released by your brain – all trying to help you survive. Blood is being drained away from your brain and into your muscles helping you to either fight the tiger or run away from it.

It makes sense then, that when you are threatened by a customer, and you believe the threat is real, you experience a fight or flight response. It's your brain doing exactly what it is supposed to do. Although it's not a pleasant feeling, it is an absolutely normal response and very human. (You are not a computer). The next time it happens, be gentle with yourself, especially if it is a real threat to your safety.

A customer told me he was going to burn my house down. I didn't think he actually would, but I was a bit worried. All he knew was my first name and where I worked, but that was enough for me to stay at my girlfriend's place for the night. My house didn't get burnt down.

Adam, 28, Contact Centre

A client left a voice message saying he was going to come into my workplace and kill me, then kill my children. We didn't muck around with the threat. We immediately contacted the police and put security guards in reception for the next week. My husband was a mess. I never heard from the client again.

Georgia, 44, Government Family Services

Fake tigers

There are probably no actual hungry tigers in your workplace trying to eat you. There may be, however, other perceived threats. I say *perceived*, deliberately. Sometimes we think about things in a way that makes them seem dangerous, when they are not. These could include things like looking stupid at work, not hitting targets, making mistakes, being challenged by your micro-managing team leader, even being given some feedback on your performance. Psychologists have identified some of the factors that make someone resilient - among them is the ability to see failure as a form of helpful feedback.

The great news is, you can check your beliefs to see if it is a real danger, or a perceived danger.

The power to choose what you say

Your words are powerful. You use them to communicate your hopes, dreams, wants, feelings etc. Certain words can have massive impact; *'I will terminate this call if you continue to use abusive language'*, *'Can I help you?'*, *'Thank you'*, *'I'm sorry I was wrong – you were right'*. (Okay, the last one is a bit harder for some people to say!)

It is empowering to know you have the power to choose which sounds come out of your mouth. No one can squeeze your vocal chords, move your mouth and simultaneously position your tongue to force words out. It's not physically possible. You, and only you, have the power to decide what you say.

And what about the power to say nothing? How powerful is it to remain silent, bite your tongue, or not pass on a rumour? You also have choice in how you say something, your tone, your timing, and your gestures. You have choice in all of these.

Sometimes you have to accept you are not going to get a word in edgewise. You really do have to learn to bite your tongue and listen, even though it is hard to listen to them rant sometimes.

David 29, Complaints, Banking Industry

The power to choose what you do

The power to choose your behaviours and actions is within your control. You decide whether or not to take action, and what action you take. While it may sometimes seem like you have no choice, unless someone is physically or chemically restraining you, you decide what you do.

When I am presenting this topic in workshops, many people challenge this idea by using the extreme example, *'If someone holds a gun to my head and tells me to do something or they will shoot me, I have to do it'*. Well, no. You still have a choice. You are still in charge of your arms and legs. The consequence of choosing not to do it, is you might be shot (!)

One woman became quite angry at me for suggesting the idea. She spoke out, *'I don't want to go to work every morning but I have to, I have no choice'*. I responded by saying I disagreed with her, that there is *always* choice. If you decide to not to go to work, the consequence is your income will be reduced, and your standard of living may change. She didn't like my response 😊

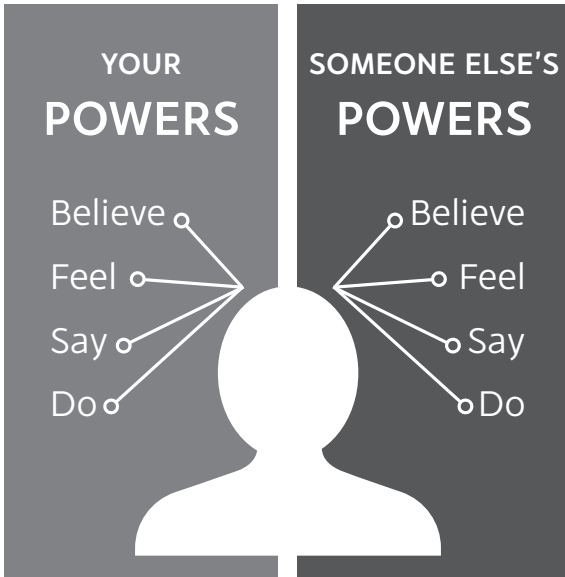
POWERFUL NOT POWERLESS

Knowing and owning your four powers allows you to move from Shakeable towards Unshakeable. It means you decide how you respond when someone abuses you, ignores you, blames you etc. It means no one can push your buttons - although they can *try* to push your buttons, you decide how you respond. Choosing how you respond also means

you can show empathy without getting caught in the emotion of the customer's sad story.

Taking responsibility for your own choices is powerful. Trying to take responsibility for other people's choices is actually disempowering to them. That's you being over-responsible. Here's a useful point to consider:

You are never responsible for a customer's choices.



Responsibility *to*, but not *for* your customers

Do you know anyone who is a 'people pleaser'? They try to make / keep everyone happy, (including customers), sometimes to their own detriment. They have trouble saying 'no' and setting boundaries. What I have noticed when I have coached people pleasers is they are often

over-responsible. They try to take responsibility for other people's beliefs, words, feelings and actions. They often feel guilty that they couldn't help. They feel bad. They often end up exhausted. The solution is to understand the concept of responsibility *to* and *for*.

There is a difference between what you are responsible for (your four powers), and who you have a responsibility to.

You have a responsibility *TO* *your* organisation. For example to:

- Perform your role to the best of your ability
- Keep a safe environment
- Ask for help when you need it
- Support your co-workers.

You have a responsibility *TO* your customers. For example to:

- Communicate clearly
- Treat them with dignity and respect
- Provide them with the service they are entitled to
- Help them with the area in which you are qualified
- Follow through (do what you say you will do).

However you are never responsible FOR what your customers choose to:

- Believe
- Feel
- Say
- Do

In the past, have you found yourself feeling responsible for your customers' beliefs, feelings, words and actions? Take the pressure off yourself 😊

I know it's not my fault the customer has their problem – but sometimes I feel bad when I can't help. Especially when they are elderly and sound so lonely and isolated.

Bianca, 27, Help Desk

Choosing to feel bad, knowing you have done everything in your control to help the customer, is a normal human response, especially when you care about people. The important distinction is 'choosing' to feel bad, which is very different to believing you have no choice in how you feel.

It's my job to make them happy.

No. No. No it's not. It's your job to provide the service you are employed to provide and treat people with dignity and respect. Some customers are happiest when they are miserable. Some customers will never be happy and get off on complaining. It is not your job to cheer them up. Have you ever tried to cheer up someone who didn't want to be cheered up? Impossible!

I made the customer angry.

No you didn't. The customer is always responsible for their own emotions. If they are choosing to be angry about the situation, it is because of what they are choosing to make the situation mean to them. Trying to take responsibility for other people's emotions will do your head in (I did say in the introduction there would be no mumbo jumbo, fluffy, airy-fairy stuff).

Knowing I am not personally
responsible for their problem helps.

Sandra, 45, Sales

Back yourself

Choosing to own your four powers allows you to move from powerless to powerful, from disempowered to empowered. It puts you in control, and allows you to be who you want to be in the world. Yes, there will be times

where you don't like the situation you are in, but you can like how you respond in those moments.

When you believe you have the resources within you to deal with what an angry customer might say to you, your confidence in your ability to handle the situation increases. You make clear decisions and back yourself. There is no need for you to bite your tongue or waste your emotional energy trying to stay calm, because you are already calm, and powerful. You trust yourself knowing you have the power to deal with whatever is thrown at you.

It's like a fight - the customer comes out swinging and throws everything at you - a barrage of offensive language - calling you everything under the sun. You name it, I've been called it. They come to accept their situation by about the fourth round.

Simon, 32, Complaints, Telecommunications Industry



ACTIVITY

When I'm driving in my car with my children, we play SPOTTO. Not the kind where you shout 'SPOTTO' when you spot a yellow car (or whatever it is in your family), we play spot the disempowered language in the songs on the radio. Maybe we are weird - but we think it's fun!

Give it a go. You may be surprised how often disempowered language is used in everyday conversation.

Notice it:

- In songs on the radio (our favourite)
- When watching TV, especially reality TV
- In your workplace
- With your family
- In your self-talk.

Practice replacing the disempowered language with empowered language using the three magic words - chose, choose, choice.



Quick Tips

- Whenever you hear yourself saying 'X makes me angry', replace it with 'I'm choosing to feel angry about X'.
- When you experience a fight or flight response, know it is just your brain trying to keep you safe. Check if it is a perceived threat or an actual threat to your safety.
- Bringing acceptance to your emotions is considered useful according to some studies.¹⁸
- You are responsible for your powers, let the customer be responsible for theirs.
- Some customers just don't want to be cheered up. They are happiest when they have something to complain about and are not interested in finding a solution. They love the drama, some love the fight.
- Check you are not a people pleaser. You can please others and at the same time look after your own needs.
- Give yourself permission to say 'no' when you need to. For your own well-being, give yourself permission to put your needs before the needs of others.

- Some customers will try to blame you for their problem when clearly it's been their choices that have created their problem.

